

Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

IN ACT III Scene 5 of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in the course of the famous 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears' speech, Marc Antony derides Caesar's apparent lack of ambition.

'Ambition,' he warns, 'should be made of sterner stuff.'

Odd though it might seem to draw parallels between a Shakespearean quote about events occurring more than 2,000 years ago and the current state of British racing politics, I can't help but think that, if we are to believe all that we read about the likely changes to the 2024 fixture list, those involved in the proposed revision of next year's fixtures are sadly lacking in ambition, whether of the sterner variety or not.

When the changes to the much reviled 'tripartite' structure of decision-making in British racing were announced last November, following a two-day industry strategy meeting in September, there was much talk about urgent action and innovation being needed. Hope was expressed that the new governance structure under which decisions would be taken by the BHA board would allow progress on matters which had hitherto been stymied by the existence of the effective veto in the respective hands of the BHA, the racecourses and the Thoroughbred Group.

Three committees were set up, whose deliberations would feed in to the BHA board to allow them to make informed decisions. In particular, the Commercial Committee was established to oversee the work of the existing fixtures and funding group, racing group and gambling strategy group.

LET'S remember why the industry strategy meeting was held and why these changes were made. British racing is in a state of crisis; prize-money is derisory to the extent that training professionals are quitting the sport and talented horses being sold to race abroad where available prize-money justifies the costs of keeping an older horse in training. Racecourse attendances are falling, costs rising, and given the lower horse population and the preponderance of low-grade handicap races, field sizes have been falling, restricting much-needed income from betting turnover.

We were assured, were we not, that stakeholders as a whole were, at last, reading from the same page and that old enmities would be laid aside in pursuit of solutions that would seek to benefit the whole industry.

It seems that the first test of this new spirit of collaboration will surround the recommendations in respect of alterations to the fixture list which the Commercial Committee will make to the BHA board in the near future. As I understand it, the committee is charged with looking at the racing product as a whole. I would expect that to encompass how the sport is marketed and promoted, how it is presented to the public in terms of potential changes to the raceday experience and existing norms, as well as the necessary revisions to the

fixture list. One would be hard-pressed, surely, to find a racing professional who doesn't think there is currently too much racing.

And here is where the lack of ambition is so evident. It appears that the main thrust of the committee's recommendations will surround Saturday racing. In particular, they are reportedly likely to recommend that only three fixtures can take place within a 'two-hour window', likely for the most part to be 2pm to 4pm, on Saturdays, and that the criteria for deciding upon which racecourses get to stage those fixtures will be based on attendances at the equivalent fixtures in 2022. Other courses with Saturday fixtures will require to move them, either to morning or twilight fixtures on Saturdays or even to Sunday evening slots.

Understandably, some racecourses are up in arms at this suggestion. Musselburgh have ploughed energy and

significant resources (not least of which is prize-money cash) into establishing their popular Easter Saturday fixture, which has attracted support from ITV Racing. Under the new proposals, the course would lose out, involving the loss of television coverage and thus, probably, the entire fixture.

In truth, to many of us, these proposals seem to represent the familiar story of the bookmakers'

tail wagging the racing dog. They want the betting public to have the opportunity to spread out their betting activity across the day; it's all about maximising betting turnover and not about what would be in the widest interests of the sport in attracting racegoers, and crucially, people who are new to the sport.

While we are all desperate to see some action taken to reverse the decline in British horseracing, surely it would have been better to have adopted a more ambitious approach to the need for change and innovation. While I appreciate that some courses 'own' their fixtures, surely a measure of consultation ought to have been undertaken as to the extent to which courses might be willing to compromise and which felt that local or individual circumstances might warrant changes to their programmes? It's clear that some courses will inevitably lose out. Are they to be compensated for such loss, and if so by how much, and by whom? Has market research been done to establish whether those likely to attend fixtures will change their minds if fixtures are switched? And, given the debate which has raged in these pages in recent issues, has any thought at all been given to changes in the racing product? Are we still to be faced with endless, low-grade handicaps without any thought being given to the complete lack of narrative which such races bear?

I WOULD be the first to acknowledge the massive task facing those charged with righting racing's current wrongs, but solutions lacking in ambition are unlikely to reverse the apparent downward slump. ■

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